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Kurdish Terrorists Target Tourism Industry: August 2006 Update

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Executive Summary

According to press reporting, in late March and early April 2006, the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks/Falcons (TAK) issued five public

statements reasserting their mission to undermine the Turkish state. The TAK statements, posted on the group's official website, warned that they would continue their campaign against government, economic and civilian targets in Turkey. In a statement issued on March 31, TAK declared that it would continue to target and intensify its actions against the tourism industry.

In the last three months, TAK has reasserted this threat and has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks that have both directly and indirectly affected the Turkish tourism industry.

TAK's History

TAK is a Kurdish terrorist organization that strives to undermine the Turkish state and to create an independent Kurdish state. Media sources speculate that this group may consist of former members of the former Worker's Party of Kurdistan (PKK), a Kurdish terrorist movement that ceased activity in 1999 but actively re-emerged in 2004, first as Kadek and then Kongra-Gel. In a June 30 statement, TAK leadership refuted any current connections to the Kongra-Gel but both groups continue to support the same separatist agenda and their exact relationship remains unclear. The Turkish National Police do not distinguish between the two groups and refer to them collectively as the PKK.

As in the TAK "Foundation Statement" released in late 2004, the recent messages warn foreign and domestic tourists to avoid Turkish tourist areas. TAK specified that the tourism industry, and not the tourists, was the main target and warned potential tourists to protect themselves by not vacationing in Turkey. The March 31 statement also claims that TAK will make "maximum efforts to carry out serious attacks."

Targets

In its March 31 statement, TAK claimed that the tourism industry is one of the main sources of financial support for the Turkish government. The group stated that they would target all sources of tourism-generated income including foreign and domestic travel agents and tour operators, and any firm or corporation and their personnel involved with the tourism industry. In June, TAK officials

used both their official website and a pro-Kurdish website to reiterate this message.

Although TAK's statements have not explicitly stated that American businesses in the tourism industry would be targeted, all foreign businesses active in the Turkish tourism industry were identified as general targets. TAK has not historically or recently targeted the American private sector but the American private sector does remain vulnerable to suffering collateral damage during an attack.

Modus Operandi

Unlike al Qa'ida and its affiliated groups, TAK has not committed any sophisticated "spectacular attacks" meant to maximize casualties. Instead, its attacks tend to be low-level and frequent. TAK attacks have generally entailed placing low-level improvised explosive devices in garbage cans and in public places near tourist areas and in upscale neighborhoods where there is little security.

Recent Attacks

Using its official website, TAK has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks in the last three months. The Turkish National Police (TNP) have not confirmed all these TAK claims however. Some of the following incidents have been officially attributed to gas explosion and other accidents. TAK claims that these official reports are attempts to downplay the significance and the threat posed by their group. To give the American private sector an idea of all possible TAK activity affecting the tourism industry, the following list includes attacks that both coincide with the typical TAK modus operandi and that have been claimed by TAK.

Istanbul

- May 24: A fire broke out in the cargo section of Istanbul's Ataturk Airport, injuring three people. TAK claimed responsibility while the TNP report the fire began after a welding spark.
- June 1: TAK claimed responsibility for an explosion at the Sezba firing range in the Uskudar District on the Asian side of Istanbul. This explosion injured ten people and has been officially attributed to faulty wiring.

- June 6: TAK assumed responsibility for a small bomb explosion at a pizza restaurant in the upscale Sisli neighborhood of Istanbul.
- June 15: An explosive device was placed in a trash barrel at pedestrian tunnel in front of the Turyol Pier in Istanbul's Eminonu district. This area in the vicinity of the New Mosque and is popular with tourists. Four people were injured.

Mersin

- May 29: A small percussion bomb detonating on in a trash barrel on Silifke Street near the fish market. Although TAK did not claim the first attack, local police believe they were responsible.
- June 3: TAK assumed responsibility for the explosion on Ataturk Avenue which injured 13 people. The explosive was left in a black plastic bag near a tobacco kiosk and may have been detonated using a remote controlled device.
- These attacks are notable because Mersin is one of Turkey's growing tourist destinations and has become popular with Western European tourists in recent years. In addition, both attacks took place in the late morning on busy streets.

Antalya

- June 25: An explosion occurred at the Great Cascade tourist area near the town of Sarilar in the Manvgat district approximately 100 km east of the port city Antalya. Press reports attribute the explosion to a bomb placed in a trash canister while local governor's office report the incident was due to a gas canister explosion. Four people were killed and 24 people were injured in the Sunday evening explosion. The waterfall is popular with European tourists and casualties included a Russian, a Hungarian and a Norwegian.

TAK's Motives and Justification

As stated above, TAK targets the tourism industry because it supports the Turkish government financially and, thus, such attacks are an indirect means of weakening the Turkish government. In the March 31 statement, TAK justified the renewed TAK campaign against the tourism industry by blaming the continuing clashes between Kurdish protesters and Turkish authorities in Turkey's southeast region on the Turkish authorities. Recent statements have continued to identify the treatment of Kurds in southeast Turkey as a justification for targeting the tourism industry. Declaring their intentions and justifying their actions ahead of time coincides with TAK's traditional modus operandi of rationalizing their campaign and warning their potential targets. It is also important to remember that low-level terrorism is not uncommon in Turkey throughout the year and that Kurdish attacks tend to increase along the western coast during the height of the Turkish tourism season in the spring and summer months.

Future Outlook

As the tourist season approached this spring, the Turkish National Police increased their security presence around major tourist destinations and the Turkish armed forces increased their presence in Southeast Turkey in a sustained effort to mitigate the Kurdish terrorist threat. As with all preventive measures, the extent to which these efforts have thwarted major attacks or other low-level explosions is difficult to determine. Similar to last summer, since the beginning of the warm weather tourist season, low-level explosions sporadically continue along the Turkish western coastline.

Although the American private sector has not been directly targeted in the past and was not explicitly named as a prime target in the recent TAK warnings, all foreign businesses active in the Turkish tourism industry were identified as potential and justifiable targets. Thus, the possibility of TAK targeting the American private sector operating in the Turkish tourism industry cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, in accordance with the latest Worldwide Caution, soft targets, including the American private sector, could suffer collateral damage during an attack in which they are not the intended targets.

Further Information

For further information on Turkey including the Turkey Consular Information Sheet, the latest Public Announcement for Turkey and the latest Worldwide Caution, visit the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs web site at travel.state.gov. For additional reports on terrorism in Turkey for the American private sector, visit osac.gov.

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